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Before You Take a Bite

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Aviation Ordnanceman 1st Class Jesse D. Eldridge and Aviation Ordnanceman 1st Class Jason B. Va chops and hamburgers during a steel beach picnic aboard the aircraft carrier USS George H.W. Bush (photo by Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Jennifer L. Jaqua/Released)


Whether we're the guest or the host, many of our summertime activities are going to center around eating. During these busy get-togethers, we often drop our guard when it comes to basic food safety. One thing is for certain – the last thing we needed in the family photo album is pictures of sick people in various stages of food poisoning.


Every year outdoor food events contribute to food borne illness ranging from nausea to hospitalization or worst. The [Center of Disease Control \(CDC\)](#) estimates* that each year roughly 1 in 6 Americans (or 48 million people) gets sick, 128,000 are hospitalized, and 3,000 die of foodborne diseases. These are the reported cases. It does not account to the tens of thousands of cases that are never reported because individuals never seek medical attention or are misdiagnosed.


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According to the CDC, food borne illnesses increase during the summer months partly because people cook and eat outdoors at events more often. The usual safety measures at our disposal when cooking indoors, including thermostat-controlled cooking, refrigeration and washing facilities, may not be available or may be substandard at outdoor events.

Another reason is the natural cause. Bacteria are present throughout the environment and in the bodies of people and animals. Many microorganisms grow faster in the warm temperatures. Most foodborne illness associated bacteria grow fastest at temperatures from 90 to 110° F. Bacteria also need moisture and the summer weather is often hot and humid. This can allow harmful bacteria to grow rapidly and in large numbers. When this happens, someone eating the food can get sick. Food borne illnesses afflict all age groups but those at the highest risk are the young, elderly and those already struggling with illness.

“We can still enjoy outdoor dining events with just some simple food safety knowledge,” said Lt. Cmdr. David Cepeda, NMCPHC microbiologist.



Crew members aboard the Nimitz-class aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln (CVN 72) prepare steaks, chicken, hotdogs, and hamburgers over charcoal grills during a Steel Beach picnic held on the flight deck. (U.S. Navy photo by Photographer's Mate 2nd Class Seth C. Peterson)

Let's look at some simple techniques to ensure that our summer outdoor dining is fun, tasty and healthy. Potentially hazardous foods (PHF) are foods that can support the growth of germs. Usually these are foods that are moist and high in protein such as meats, fish, dairy products, pastas and rice. Some other foods not normally associated with PHF but just as hazardous are cut tomatoes, cut melons and raw seed sprouts. When packing the car and headed out to picnics, festivals or a road trip, plan ahead. If you are headed to picnic or the beach with PHFs place them in a cooler with ice or freezer packs. Make sure that these foods stay below 41°F. Separate raw foods from crooked foods. Try not to bring leftovers back home. Keep your cooler out of the sun as much as possible.

Dirty hands are a major cause of foodborne illness. Wash your hands with hot soapy water before handling food and after using the bathroom, changing diapers and handling pets. When eating away from home, find out if there's a source of a safe drinking water. If not, bring water for preparing and cleaning. Or pack clean, wet, disposable washcloths, moist towelettes and paper towels for cleaning hands and surfaces.

When buying food from an outdoor vendor the CDC recommends looking for food safety

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practices, such as a clean workstation, employees washing their hands, employees wearing gloves or using tongs, if the vendor been inspected by the local health department, and has the license to sell food. When you get the PHFs from a vendor a simple rule of thumb is that hot foods should be hot and cold foods should be cold. Never eat or drink PHFs that are lukewarm. If you bring food to a fair or festival from home, be sure to keep food handling and storage times in mind. Don't let food sit out for more than two hours. On a hot day (90°F or higher), reduce this time to one hour.

If you fancy yourself as a grill master and are entertaining at home applying some simple food safety principle can assure that your food is delicious and safe! Use these simple guidelines when grilling foods. Defrost PHFs either in a refrigerator. If using a microwave to defrost the food should be immediately placed on the grill after thawed. Marinate foods in the refrigerator and not at room temperatures. If you have leftover marinade that will be used as a sauce on the cooked food, reserve a portion of the marinade before putting raw meat and poultry in it. If you are going to use marinade that has had raw meat and poultry in it, make sure to let it come to a boil so it can destroy any harmful bacteria. Keep your foods refrigerated until ready to use. Only take the foods out when you are ready to place on the grill. Make sure your prep area is kept clean. Never use the same platter, pans or utensils used for raw foods. Any good cook has a good and functioning food thermometer. This addition to your grilling arsenal can help you make sure foods are cooked to correct temperature for your family and guess. This greatly reduces the risk of illness.

Cook food to a safe internal temperature to destroy harmful bacteria. Meat and poultry cooked on a grill often browns very fast on the outside. Poultry should reach 165°F; hamburgers made of ground beef should reach 155°F; veal, and lamb steaks, roast beef and pork chops can be cooked to 145°F. NEVER partially grill meat or poultry and finish cooking later. When reheating cooked meats like hot dogs, grill to 165°F or until steaming hot.

After cooking meat and poultry on the grill, keep it hot, 135°F or warmer until served. Lastly refrigerate any leftovers promptly in shallow containers. Discard any leftovers left out more than more than four hours at room temperature (approximately 68 to 72°F) or one hour if temperatures are above 90°F.

Though summertime eating can present some food safety challenges following these simple principles stated above can ensure that the foods we prepare, serve are safe. Let us stay healthy and enjoy those picnics, festivals, carnivals and outdoor grilling events. Have fun and be safe! For further information on summertime safe eating please click [here](#).

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